

# Education Without Compulsion: Toward New Visions of Gifted Education

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*The aim of this paper is to induce doubt about the ethical rightness of compulsory education laws and inspire educators to imagine and begin to make a world in which there are many different forms of gifted education. The paper does this in three ways. It paints a polemical picture of gifted education as a minor variation on public schooling and describes the contradictions and limitations this entails. It presents a short history of education in the United States to support the claim that compulsory schooling aims to shape the character of children in the interests of religion, government, corporations, and other groups. It argues that compulsory schooling is inconsistent with the liberal democratic value of the right to self-determination. The paper also offers a conception of education for self-development as one vision of what gifted education could be were it freed from the strictures of compulsory schooling.*

The worst, the most difficult thing that affects us as people is the failure of imagination. We do not realize that various things are possible, which is to say that we don't realize that most everything is contingent, that things could be different.

—Alexander Nehemas (Carrier, 1998, para 28 from end)

In the United States, most children ages 6 to 16, must, under penalty of law, attend school or a legislated equivalent. The failure of parents to adhere to state laws governing school attendance can result in fines and imprisonment (Novello, 1998). The failure of adolescents to attend school can result in loss of a driver's license, fines, jail time, or commitment to court-mandated truancy programs (e.g., Superior Court of Arizona in Maricopa County, n.d.).

Gifted educators show little awareness that states mandate universal compulsory education, that compulsory education laws are ethically inconsistent with significant values of gifted education, that compulsory education sets severe limits on educational practices and

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philosophies, or that almost all of the ways in which gifted education “serves the needs” of gifted children are backed by state power. The aim of this paper is to induce doubt about the value and ethical rightness of the compulsory education laws and inspire educators to imagine and begin to make a world in which there are many different forms of gifted education, all freed from the strictures of compulsory schooling. This is an ambitious aim. In the minds of many, compulsory schooling *is* education (Buckman, 1973).

The first section of this paper offers a polemical picture of gifted education as a minor variation on public schooling and describes the contradictions and limitations this entails. The second section is a brief sketch of the history of public education in the United States that illustrates how compulsory schooling serves the interests of religion, government, corporations, and other groups. The third section attempts to undermine the ethical foundation of public compulsory education by showing that it is incompatible with liberal democratic values. The fourth section presents a vision of gifted education as self-development.

### **Gifted Education and Public Schooling**

Giftedness as we discuss it in our journals, investigate it in our research, and identify it in our protocols is primarily a public school-based phenomenon. Gifted education exists to accommodate certain “special” students in public schools (cf. Borland, 1997; Sapon-Shevin, 1994). Gallagher (2002) argues that gifted education is defined almost entirely by social policy set by law, court decisions, and administrative rules (professional groups are the fourth source of policy). The practices of gifted education are, not surprisingly, mostly minor variations on regular public school programs and methods that leave untouched the main structures, values, and goals of public education. Enrichment, acceleration, leadership and creativity training, ability grouping, special curricula, and other forms and means of gifted education are conservative in their underlying theories and philosophies. They are public school tweaks. They do not address the root, the radical, of education.

The bureaucracy of public schools leads gifted educators to inordinate worries about bookkeeping matters. Do we enter a child in the category of gifted, talented in math, creative but learning disabled, or . . . ? Gifted educational research with its investigations of the effects of grouping, effectiveness of new identification protocols, causes of underachievement, characteristics of gifted students, and impact of curriculum compacting on achievement test scores rarely leaves the public schoolroom. Gifted educators take seriously *A Nation at Risk*, *Goals 2000*, *National Excellence*, *No Child Left Behind*, and other government reports and laws as offering important and meaningful (though sometimes controversial) guidance for education. Many, including some of the most prominent, accept the “gifted as the nation’s greatest resource” (recently repackaged as “gifted as social capital”) justification for gifted education (e.g., Benbow, Lubinski, & Sanjani, 1995; Dai & Renzulli, 2000; Feldhusen, 1998; Renzulli, 2002; Schwartz, 1994; Tannenbaum, 2001; Treffinger, 1998). They justify public funding for gifted education on the grounds that gifted children or all children, properly cultivated, make essential contributions to the cultural and economic life of the country. In doing so, they implicitly accept government conceptions of economic health, cultural assets, and national well-being (Howley, Howley, & Pendarvis, 1995). I have found no discussion, no mention even, of alternative or radical education philosophies of education in gifted education literature, save in homeschooling literature (e.g., Kearney, n.d.; Rivero, 2002), an article by Piirto (1999) discussing postmodern pedagogy, and a presentation by Piirto (2000) on the ideology of gifted education. Critical pedagogy (Freire, 1968), the modern school movement (Avrich, 1980), deschooling (Illich, 1970), and the work of John Holt (1976), Paul Goodman (1964), A. S. Neill (1960), Murray Rothbard (1999), and other critics of public schooling seem not to exist for gifted educators.

Gifted education is an innocent, ignorant of the history of public schooling, its own history (Borland, 1990), and the role of ideology, corporations, foundations, industry groups, religions, and other institutions in instituting compulsory schooling and shaping school agendas (Gatto, 2001; Howley et al., 1995; Spring, 1994). Buffeted by charges of elitism, favoritism, discrimination, and ineffectiveness

(e.g., Treffinger, 1998) and doubts about the reality of “giftedness” (Borland, 1997), we worry about our funding and future and struggle to reinvent ourselves to be able to carry on “meeting the needs” of the gifted—through compulsory public schooling. When we establish private schools, we largely recreate public schooling as superior college preparation.

None of the contributors to a recent volume aimed at *Rethinking Gifted Education* (Borland, 2003) propose educational models that challenge compulsory schooling or even acknowledge that schooling is compulsory. Most of the rethinking is just thinking how gifted education can better fit into public schools. Heng (2003), the most radical of the authors, calls for gifted education that is “beyond school,” but not beyond compulsory schooling. She defends “a learner-centered vision for education. . . . in which children are regarded as ends not means” (p. 59), but she doesn’t see the contradiction between compelling students to attend school and treating them as ends.

The consequences of the limited visions of gifted educators include impoverished views of life, constricted and narrow development of children designated as gifted, an acceptance of the status quo workings of government and corporate power, and moral contradictions. Gifted education could be a means of intellectual and personal liberation, but it is mostly a tool of power (cf. Howley et al., 1995; Margolin, 1994; Pendarvis, Howley, & Howley, 1999). We want school to be *for* children, but as long as we *compel* attendance, school is necessarily something we do *to* children. Gifted educators want gifted children to develop their selves, realize their potentials, create new and amazing art and ideas, deepen their spirituality, and even develop their intellects and critical faculties. But, they never challenge the limits placed on these tasks by public schools and compulsory schooling, and they don’t face the moral contradiction of *compelling* students to attend school and then *helping* them develop their selves and talents.

Personal growth and talent development concern core aspects of children’s being, their deepest selves. Attempts to influence these in situations that children, alone or guided by their parents, are not free to reject are coercion, not help, insults, not expressions of respect, no matter how well-meant. Imagine if we adults were forced to attend

institutions in which we were “helped” to realize ourselves by people who really cared about us. We would loudly object that our liberty to develop ourselves as we choose would be violated, no matter the good intentions of our helpers.

One explanation for the limited visions of gifted educators may be that gifted education is simply parasitic upon universal compulsory schooling: It has no other *raison d'être* than to advocate for and serve a small group of “exceptional” children in public schools, which are assumed to serve “average” children pretty well. If public education really was individualized, as Borland (2003) advocates, “gifted” education and “gifted” children would become moot. But, the aspirations of gifted educators and even the implications of individualized schooling push against the practical and ethical limitations of compulsory schooling. Some gifted educators have educational visions that cannot be realized in compulsory settings, though they seem unaware of this. For example, Roeper’s (1990) vision of education for life; Schultz’s (2002) vision of character education as a “process where adults, adolescents, and others engage in the development of community” (p. 10); Piechowski’s (1998, 2000) work on spiritual giftedness; Schultz’s and Delisle’s (1997) work on the relationships among curricula, self, and visions of the good life; and Heng’s (2003) call to serve children’s search for meaning cannot be realized practically or ethically in compulsory settings. Gifted education is ripe for articulating educational visions that explicitly reject compulsion.

See for yourself. Take any conception of giftedness: asynchronous development (Silverman, 1997), a minimum IQ score, Renzulli’s (1977) three rings, or talent—if you belong to the new wave in gifted education (e.g., Feldhusen, 1998). Take any conception of life and *The Most Important Things* (Grant, 2002; Schultz & Delisle, 1997) and anything else you think is important to the growth and education of young people. Now, imagine gifted education independent of compulsory public education. Imagine it without government-mandated learning objectives, standardized tests, minimum seat time, age grouping, school as preparation for the next grade level, and textbooks chosen by a Texas school board. Imagine it without the necessity of preparing individuals for school, college, and career (Grant, 2002; Roeper, 1990). Imagine gifted educations that place

the development of the individual in the great realities of life—self, sex, ethics, power, spirit, meaning, community, nature. I think you will see that your vision of gifted education is more vital and important than the visions operating in compulsory public schools.

### **The History and Goals of Compulsory Education**

Compulsory public education, by its nature, exists to change children, to shape their minds, character, values, skills, and conduct. The founders of the United States and the founders of public schooling knew this, argued about it, and defended or opposed government roles in education for this reason. The history of education in America deserves a treatment that shows multiple points of view on the forces, rationales, hidden agendas, and philosophies that influenced public education. What I offer only touches on highlights and a few major points of views on the forces driving public education in the United States. I hope it is sufficient to incite doubt about the goodness, necessity, and inevitability of compulsory education.

The first compulsory education law in the colonial United States was passed in 1642 by the Massachusetts Bay Colony. It required parents and masters to provide an education in reading and trade. Among the reasons for this law were “concerns that youth readily accept the developing religious, political and social patterns and become good citizens of the state and of the newly established church” (Kotin & Aikman, 1980, p. 12). The Massachusetts Bay Colony was largely populated by Calvinist Puritans who were keen to keep their kids firm in the faith (Rothbard, 1974). By 1671, all colonies except Rhode Island had passed compulsory education laws based on the model of the 1642 Massachusetts Act and a 1648 refinement (Kotin & Aikman). “For the first time in history the state assumed clear responsibility for the education and training of *all* children” (Kotin & Aikman, p. 14). In 1647, the Governors of Massachusetts Bay Colony passed a law that towns of a certain size must have an elementary school where children could learn to read the Bible. This act, also known as the Old Deluder Satan Act, was passed to ensure that children were armed with the knowledge of

scripture in their battle against Satan (Kotin & Aikman). Children, however, were not compelled to attend school.

The United States Constitution, written in 1787, does not mention schools or education. Parents were responsible for their children's education, and likely they would not have tolerated state interference (Boss & Wurtz, 1994). After the Revolution, support for public education gradually increased. Massachusetts again led, establishing the first mandatory school laws in 1789, creating the first public high school in 1820, making all grades of public school free to all pupils in 1827, and, in 1852, passing the first general compulsory attendance law. This was the first law to compel parents and others responsible for children to send children of a certain age (8–14) to school for a certain number of weeks a year (Kotin & Aikman, 1980). By 1918, all states had universal compulsory attendance laws. Universal compulsory schooling is a very recent phenomenon in the history of human beings' efforts to shape and maintain societies (Boss & Wurtz).

The basic structure of modern public schools was created in the mid 1800s, the era of the common school movement (Spring, 1994). The most prominent advocates of this movement were Horace Mann, the father of the American public school, and Henry Barnard (Spring). The common school movement began the standardization and systemization of public education: (a) All children received the same social and political ideology, (b) schools were an instrument of public policy that aimed at fixing society's problems, and (c) state agencies were created to control local schools (Spring). Glenn (2002) argues that the

“common school agenda”. . . the deliberate effort to create in the entire youth of a nation common attitudes, loyalties, and values, and to do so under central direction by the state. . . [is] deeply rooted in our thinking about education. (pp. 4–5)

What drove the creation of modern compulsory schooling? Howley et al. (1995) in their important critique of American schools and gifted education, echo J. S. Mill (1859/1978) in their claim that “schooling aims, as it has for a very long time, to inculcate just those habits, attitudes, and skills that legitimate it in the eyes of powerful



economic interests" (p. 6). Spring (1974) agrees: "Schooling means . . . shaping the total character of the individual to meet the political and economic demands of the state" (p. 139). Gatto (1993) argues that compulsory schooling was not instituted in order to make people more literate, thoughtful, knowledgeable, or intellectually skillful, but to make them more manageable. Curti (1959) sees the history of American education as the history of conflict between those who want to use education to maintain power and those who want to use it to improve life for everyone. Reitman (1992) also sees American education as the result of struggle between incompatible goals: promoting democracy, supporting economic competitiveness, and teaching moral values (as cited in Miller, n.d.).

Kotin and Aikman (1980) mention a number of reasons or forces behind the compulsory education laws: to assimilate immigrants and train them for jobs, to make immigrants "uniform Americans" with standard values and goals, to enable all to enjoy the benefits of democracy, to provide an intelligent electorate and leadership, to eliminate illiteracy, to prevent crime and poverty, to forestall revolution, to train skilled workers, to keep children from being exploited, to equalize opportunities for economic success for poor and disadvantaged children, and to promote international economic competitiveness. George Cheever (as cited in Rothbard, 1974) eloquently expressed a mid-1800s belief in the salutary power of teaching the Bible in free public schools:

We are in great danger from the dark and stolid infidelity and vicious radicalism of a large portion of the foreign immigrating population . . . . How can we reach the evil at its roots . . . [and] defeat the working of that malignant, social, anti-Christian poison? How can the children of such a population be reached except in our free public schools? (p. 21)

Horace Mann saw free public education as an equalizer. He initially opposed compulsory attendance laws, but seeing a "tremendous discrepancy between the wealth of factory owners and poverty of the laborers" (Boss & Wurtz, 1994, p. 265), he came to support them. He also wanted "to drive out of the lower classes any thought of violence or rebellion . . . [and] 'to inform and regulate the will of the



people” (Rothbard, 1974, p. 22). Tyack (1966) argued that prominent intellectuals of the post-Revolutionary War period—Benjamin Rush, Thomas Jefferson, and Noah Webster—were anxious about freedom and wanted to create “a new unity, a common citizenship and culture, and an appeal to a common future . . . [a] uniform American” (p. 31). Rush (as cited in Tyack, 1966) was very explicit in his belief that Americans must become uniform and pliable. He proposed “one general, and uniform system of education, which will render the mass of the people more homogeneous and thereby fit them more easily for uniform and peaceable government” (p. 33). Writing 75 years later, J. S. Mill (1859/1978) acknowledged Rush’s success: “State education is a mere contrivance for molding people to be exactly like one another; and as the mold in which it casts them is that which pleases the predominant power in the government” (p. 105). Many of the most influential voices in public education from the mid-1800s into this century—for example, Horace Mann, G. Stanley Hall, Calvin Stowe, Dallas Bachet, Henry Dwight, and Henry Barnard—were influenced by the Prussian education system (Gatto, 2001; Rothbard, 1974). The Prussian goal of education, precipitated by an embarrassing loss to Napoleon in 1806, was obedient soldiers and workers, well-subordinated civil servants and clerks, and citizens who thought alike, except for a small elite who were trained to think and lead (Gatto, 1996).

Compulsory schooling cannot help but have political and moral goals. Horace Mann (as cited in Goldberg, 1996) said that “no idea can be more erroneous than that children go to school to learn the rudiments of knowledge only, and not to form character” (p. 85). Mann was right in his central claim, but naive in counterposing the neutral rudiments of knowledge with morally charged efforts to shape character. There are no rudiments of knowledge, only what particular communities and groups consider the basics. The means and conditions for teaching these basics shape character. Besser (1993) shows how the military, government, corporations, and higher education leaders were instrumental in creating our newest “basic,” computer literacy, and how training in computer skills fosters work habits desired by businesses. Even such seemingly innocent subjects as numeracy and literacy have implicit political and moral

agendas. What should students read? What should they calculate? How should they be taught? There are no value-neutral answers.

Compulsory universal schooling was by no means universally accepted. Today, most Americans accept the justice of compulsory schooling and see it as synonymous with public education (McGhan, 1997), but it was not always this way. The 1852 Massachusetts law

was resisted—sometimes with guns—by an estimated eighty percent of the Massachusetts population, the last outpost in Barnstable on Cape Cod not surrendering its children until the 1880s, when the area was seized by militia and children marched to school under guard. (Gatto, 1992, p. 25)

Indeed,

Many felt that such legislation deprived parents of their inalienable right to control their children, and was an unconstitutional infringement upon the liberty granted by the Fourteenth Amendment. . . . Claims that the laws were “un-American” and inimical to the spirit of a free democratic institution were raised. (Kotin & Aikman, 1980, p. 27)

Even today, many people resist compulsory schooling. Homeschoolers, parents of certain religious faiths, anarchists, and free thinkers resist the intrusion of the government into their children’s minds and characters and instead choose their own ways of educating children.

### **A Principled Critique of Compulsory Education**

Whether we support the goal of creating literate citizens, but not the goal of training workers; whether we like the idea of teaching reading, but not the idea of teaching Christian values; whether we want to use education to maintain power for a small group of people or to improve things for everyone; whether we believe schools should promote drug-free family values or libertarian atheism; we must answer the question: Is it right for the state to compel students to attend school? Many, as I do, answer the question in the negative

(e.g., Gatto, 1992; Illich, 1970; Novello, 1998; Richman & Kopel, 1996; Rothbard, 1999).

The contexts for answering the question are as many as the number of our political philosophies, religions, and visions of the good society (Miller, n.d.). We can answer from the point of view of anarchism, or Plato's Republic, or the theonomy of the "extreme Christian right." There is no neutral starting point. An argument can only be effective insofar as it speaks to the assumptions and values of its audience. I address the question from within the tradition of political liberalism that originates in the philosophies of John Locke and J. S. Mill. Many of us find this tradition congenial. Its central claim is that one is free to live one's life as one chooses, as long as one does not harm or limit the freedom of another. The core idea of liberalism is that freedom is the basic political condition of human beings and that any limitation on freedom must be justified (Gauss, 1996).

The state's demand that all students, ages 6 to 16, attend a public school or some legislated equivalent is *prima facie* inconsistent with this right. It takes authority that properly belongs to children or parents and puts it in the hands of the state. Indeed, from its beginning, compulsory schooling was based on the idea that children belong to the state, not to their parents or themselves (Gatto, 1996; Rothbard, 1974). Benjamin Rush (1786) wrote, "Let our pupil be taught that he does not belong to himself, but that he is public property" (as cited in Tyack, 1966, p. 34). Compulsory schooling patently affronts the basic civil liberty that is the foundation of American democracy. Justice Marshall wrote, "Our whole constitutional heritage rebels at the thought of giving government the power to control men's minds" (*Stanley v. Georgia*, 1969).

The right to determine one's own life, however, is not absolute. Boss and Wurtz (1994) describe two broad reasons in favor of the government denying individual liberty: if the denial of individual liberty brings substantial benefits to society, and if the denial of liberty protects individuals from harm. Laws prohibiting suicide and drug use, laws mandating military drafts, and many other legal limits on freedom have been justified on one or both of these grounds. Liberal arguments in favor of universal compulsory education acknowledge

that schools shape the minds and souls of children and take this as the very reason why children should be compelled to attend school: The violation of children's and parents' liberties is acceptable because of the beneficial effects of universal compulsory schooling for society as a whole and for individual children. I will argue that there is no compelling liberal defense of compulsory schooling: Compulsory schooling is not a rational and efficient means of delivering specific benefits to society or of preventing specific harm to children; compulsory schooling's positive effects cannot outweigh the deprivation of individual liberty it entails.

### *The Debatable Benefits of Compulsory Schooling*

There simply are no dangers—to health, safety, or physical, emotional, moral, or intellectual development—that threaten *every* child from which compulsory schooling offers protection. Compulsory schooling, then, cannot be justified on grounds that it prevents harm. Arguments about the possible benefits of compulsory schooling quickly get bogged down in a miasma of conflicting views of goals and benefits. Should schools produce “competent, caring, loving, and lovable people” (Noddings, 1995, p. 99); people who believe in the “work ethic and obedience to legitimate authority and the important nonreligious themes articulated in the Ten Commandments” (Wynne, 1989, p. 19); people with the skills needed in a 21st century labor market; people capable of using their talents to the fullest; people who realize their true Selves; or people who . . . ? Some may applaud “left” educational movements critical of mainstream values, for example, social justice education, queer pedagogy, and feminist pedagogy. Others may damn them as harboring the beginnings of the end of the American way of life.

The severe restrictions on freedom of speech, freedom of movement, freedom of association and access to politically dissident ideas, and the enforced obedience to authority characteristic of public schooling can be cited with either approval or disapprobation. Goods from one point of view are evils from another. Horace Mann faced this problem 150 years ago. In an attempt to avoid conflict over the content of education, he proposed that schools

teach “only those articles of republican faith that were approved by ‘all sensible and judicious men, all patriots, and all genuine republicans’” (Spring, 1994, p. 69) and non-denominational Christian values. He failed, of course. Without agreement on the goals and benefits of schooling among the citizens of a state, compulsory schooling is a means whereby some voting citizens force years of alien and repugnant values and ideas upon the children of other citizens.

The argument that compulsory education is needed to prepare children for participation in a liberal democracy runs afoul of the same problem of disagreement over the goals of schooling. The argument begs the questions:

- What exactly is a democratic society?
- What skills are needed to maintain it?
- How are the skills best taught?

These are all matters of contention.

John Dewey, our great philosopher of democracy, is of no help here. Insofar as he is right that education is an expression of a community’s view of life, its values, aspirations, and visions of improvement and to the extent that our country is composed of a multitude of overlapping communities, many wildly at odds with others, there will be no agreement on the ends of schooling. Indeed, we have no agreement on the ends of schooling. To put the point another way, insofar as Dewey is right that “a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (Institute for Learning Technologies, 1994, chapter 7, para. 2), we cannot agree on the means and ends of schooling in a democracy if we lack a common mode of democratic life. We lack such a mode.

As an empirical claim about a necessary condition of democracy, the argument that compulsory education is needed to prepare children for participation in a liberal democracy founders on one prominent counterexample: The United States survived as a democracy for many years without universal compulsory schooling. This fact makes it very difficult to argue that compulsory schooling is a necessary condition for democracy. Perhaps experimentation would

show that democracy is best served by allowing children freedom from state-mandated education but requiring it of adults. It is very hard to see how current compulsory schooling with its anti-intellectualism (Howley et al., 1995) and restrictions on freedom (Boss & Wurtz, 1994) provides students with the skills and values needed for thoughtful, informed exercise of freedom in a democratic society, yet we are carrying on, in some fashion. The empirical relationship between forms of education and forms of society is not straightforward.

### *The Inefficiency and Irrationality of Compulsory Schooling*

Arguments that compulsory schooling is a legitimate government infringement on individual liberty also falter on grounds of efficiency and rationality. Universal compulsory schooling laws require *all* individuals of certain ages to spend a fixed number of hours and days in school doing roughly the same sorts of things at roughly the same time for roughly the same amount of time. This fact leads directly to the conclusion that compulsory schooling *cannot* be a rational and efficient means of delivering specific benefits to society or of preventing specific harm to children.

Rationality and efficiency argue that schooling should serve specific goals. If state laws had specific purposes and were rational, *some* children would not need to attend school because they would be able to accomplish the purpose of school in other ways and *all* children would be free to leave school when the purposes had been accomplished. Patients are free, indeed required, to leave hospitals when the purpose of hospitalization is accomplished. Even prisoners generally get the benefit of sentences that address their particular crime and circumstances. And, we don't require all children to attend state-run cafeterias on the grounds that some would otherwise go hungry. Laws requiring individuals to remain in school until they can demonstrate specific competencies *might* be rational and *might* justify deprivation of liberty if we could agree on the goals of schooling. Gifted children and their parents may welcome such laws. The only goal that compulsory schooling has rational

and efficient means of achieving is that of preventing large numbers of people from spending thousands of hours of their lives as they or their parents see fit.

*Compulsory Schooling Is an Unjustifiable Infringement on Liberty*

The conclusion of the foregoing is that compulsory schooling is an unjustifiable infringement on individual liberty. It is not rational or efficient; it cannot protect all children from harm, because there are no harms threatening them all; and its “benefits” are the positive values and beliefs of some and the evils of others. But, most parents and educators support compulsory education not because they have been persuaded by arguments to the contrary (probably few have heard them or even think of schooling as compulsory), but because they believe that schooling is necessary to getting a decent job (Collins, 1979). This is not a reason for compulsory schooling, but for job preparation in many forms. Compulsory schooling may well perpetuate inequalities between rich and poor rather than equalize incomes or give all an equal chance at good jobs (Collins). Van Galen (1988)

The enormous expansion of education since the mid-nineteenth century has had no effects at all for increasing social mobility. . . . there has been the same level of correlation between fathers’ and sons’ occupations with a large educational system, a moderate-sized one, or virtually no educational system at all. (Collins, p. 182)

Incomes have been equalized only to the extent that the top 10% of income earners make less and the next two deciles make more. Incomes at the bottom and middle have not increased (Collins, 1979). Van Galen (1988) writes that “evidence mounts from critics of both public and private schools that the formal and hidden curriculums of school contribute to the reproduction of social inequalities rather than equalizing opportunity” (p. 52). More recent data suggest that the income gap between the most wealthy and the rest of the population has increased since the 1970s (Krugman, 2002).



*Toward the End of Compulsory Schooling*

Gatto (1992) writes,

It is the great triumph of compulsory government monopoly mass-schooling that among even the best of my fellow teachers, and among even the best of my students' parents, only a small number can imagine a different way to do things. "The kids have to know how to read and write, don't they?"... "They have to learn how to follow orders if they ever expect to keep a job." (p. 12)

When I talk to people about ending compulsory education, they immediately think of it ending tomorrow. They imagine society as it is now minus compulsory education and in anxiety and anger ask: Where will kids go when parents work? What about all the really terrible parents who will lock their kids up at home? What about the stupid parents who will try to teach and fail? What about kids from chaotic homes that "need" the structure of school? What about the poor kids whose parents won't teach them anything of value? What about all the bad influences that will go uncorrected? That society is filled with ills, some caused by public schooling, and the fact that hardly anyone really considers evidence or argument when asking these questions, seems to make no difference. We have faith that schools will make things better and are not inclined to look at what schools actually accomplish or imagine new ways of educating children.

Compulsory public schooling will end when we see that it is not necessary to success and happiness, when age-segregation barriers break down, when communities become more important than profits, when adults stop thinking they can improve society by trying to mold children instead of changing themselves, and when people creatively devise many, many alternatives to school and public school systems that can no longer support themselves. Something like this happened once. For about 100 years from the late 1600s to the late 1700s, New England gradually removed all compulsory education laws from its books (compulsory education laws required masters and parents to provide an education; they did not require that students attend school). Education

laws became both irrelevant and impossible to enforce (Kotin & Aikman, 1980). Growing frontier life required children to work to support their families, people left towns for the country, families and governments were weakened by Indian Wars, religious pluralism grew, Puritanism lost influence, and religion in general became less important. Circumstances changed, interests changed, and a system of laws and a set of beliefs fell away.

There are a few signs that the era of universal compulsory schooling in this country may be ending. The increasing number of homeschooled children “from 50,000 to 1.5–1.9 million in 15 years” (Talbot, 2001, p. 136), calls for vouchers, a 25% dropout rate in high schools, a third of all teachers leaving the profession after 2 years, the rise of the use of drugs to manage students in classrooms (Goldberg, 1996), the rise of unschooling movements (e.g., Griffith, 1998), and other signs of dissatisfaction with public education point to growing disillusionment with the promises of compulsory education. Critiques of compulsory schooling that were leveled largely by intellectuals in the 1960s and 1970s are becoming mainstream. Llewellyn (1998) has written the third edition of a book for teenagers that tells *How to Quit School and Get a Real Life and Education*. Wolfthal (1986), a teacher in Bronx, NY, writes:

It is difficult to imagine that [compulsory schooling] was once considered a boon to mankind. Students, for the most part normal, healthy youngsters continue to tune out. Teachers, for the most part intelligent, decent adults, continue to burn out. The waste of time, energy, and potential is colossal on both sides. It was a giant leap backwards when the cause of free universal public education turned into a movement for compulsory schooling. (p. 108)

McGhan (1997), a retired teacher of 33 years, writes, “Compulsory school attendance is a 19th-century idea that has apparently out-lived its usefulness” (p. 135). Compulsory public schooling is not a natural force, not an immovable feature of the landscape. We created it. We can end it.

### **Gifted Education and the Meaning of Life: One Vision of Gifted Education**

If gifted education is about anything other than promoting more efficient ways of helping a small group of gifted children develop institutionally approved talents and get into good colleges and get good jobs and become “good” citizens, it is about helping children and adolescents realize themselves. This is my vision of what gifted education could be if it were freed from the strictures of compulsory schooling. I ask myself: What else are the deep goals of gifted education? If not the development of free minds, of creative persons who know themselves, know their strengths, and can use their intellectual tools and their sensibilities according to their own philosophy of life, what else can they be? Any goal of education other than the free development of the child means using children to serve some goal we have for them—to become leaders, yield returns as precious national resources, preserve and carry forward civilization, and so on (cf. Grant & Piechowski, 1999).

Education for self-development is not about academic achievement, socialization, schooling, career preparation, serving the nation, or job training. The task of education is the task of living: finding or creating a self and a sense of the world of things, people, and other beings, and finding meaningful ways of fitting self and world together. Education is about living out one’s passions and purposes and creating a coherent life, a workable individuality. It is premised on the perennial humanist idea that the only life worth living is one’s own life, not a copy of someone else’s, not one made of an unexamined hodgepodge of stuff from state-mandated curricula and the youth culture created by preventing children from fully participating in civic life (cf. Decarvalho, 1991; Goodman, 1983; Maslow, 1962; Rogers, 1983).

Roeper (1990), the first educator in the field to offer a detailed, coherent, and principled alternative to mainstream gifted education, describes a similar view. Her philosophy of education for life is based on the belief in respecting self-actualization, the growth and uniqueness of each member of the community, and the reality of interdependence. “It is a concept of self-actualization for all, as opposed to

the concept of education for outside success where the primary focus is on what one can do rather than on who one is as a human being” (p. 1).

The common view of education as job preparation and as a means to social and financial advancement, as well as learning how to fit in and get along, is shallow and self-defeating. It robs life of meaning and vitality while offering the false promise that we will get these things later. Roeper (1990) asks:

If [a child] learns all the so-called basic skills and goes obediently and successfully through the system and enters a prestigious college, will s/he be happy, wealthy, and wise? . . . Education . . . has become isolated and alienated from life. It has become based on narrow, short-term goals, which we somehow believe will fulfill mankind's promises . . . we raise illiterates when it comes to mastering the science or art of living. . . . We are really engaged in preparation for college. (p. 7)

Roeper (1990, 1995) has already revisioned gifted education. Though she does not reject compulsory schooling, her philosophy is consistent with noncompulsory education. More recently, Schultz & Delisle (1997), who describe an education for the Good Life, “the process of self-examination and reflection—making sense of one's existence in relationship to others and being able to live conscience-free [without violating one's principles] with the results” (p. 99), Reynolds and Piirto (2005), who argue for bringing depth psychology into gifted education, and Heng (2003), who argues for a “curriculum of conscience,” have advanced views that have implications for rejecting compulsory schooling.

The idea that the goal of education is individual self-actualization is not new to gifted education. It has been a part of it since the middle of last century when humanist psychologists first proposed the concept of self-actualization. Roeper's (1990, 1995) radical alternative to mainstream gifted education shows that creating one's own life, actualizing oneself, and striving for the good life cannot be done in conditions of unfreedom. We see this also in Schultz and Delisle (1997), who try unsuccessfully to fit a view of education

as the development of the Self into the constraints of compulsory schooling, which they tacitly accept. They argue, for example, that “if students are not involved in [curriculum development], education becomes something that is done to them, not with them” (p. 99). If this is true, how much more is education something done to students when they are compelled to attend school? The essential elements of self-creation, choice, and freedom are necessarily severely limited in compulsory schooling. If your thinking about education begins with the idea of education as self-actualization or self-realization, you end with a rejection of compulsory education. If you reject compulsory education, you end up with a key condition for self-realization—freedom.

### Conclusion

If one accepts the arguments and evidence presented above, one can no longer accept gifted education in most of its current forms. (Of course, these arguments apply equally well to the education of all children.) Nothing in the nature of learning, democracy, or creating communities requires universal compulsory schooling. Universal compulsory schooling is not an effective means of accomplishing anything except fixed seat-time exposure to state-approved ideas, segregated age groupings, and hampered realizations of full and meaningful lives. It does not and cannot provide a key condition for self-realization. If education is to serve the individual, it must serve self-realization. But, this is but one view. Ending compulsory education would allow many different visions of education to flourish. Gifted education would be much richer, diverse, and significant if more educators began to think about and create ways to serve gifted children that did not require force.

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